



IT IS IN THE SHELTER
OF EACH OTHER THAT
THE PEOPLE LIVE.

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February 2, 2018

Chairman Ajit Pai
Commissioner Mignon Clyburn
Commissioner Michael O'Rielly
Commissioner Brendan Carr
Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel
Federal Communications Commission
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

Re: In the Matter of Promoting Telehealth in Rural America, WC Docket No 17-310

Dear Chairman Pai and FCC Commissioners:

Thank you for your support of the Rural Health Care Program (RHC) and for opening a rulemaking and order to review the RHC Program and ensure Americans have access to advanced telehealth services no matter where they live. We are writing in response to the Commission's request for comment on the appropriate budget increase and other reforms for the RHC Program.

By making telehealth and telemedicine services affordable, the FCC's RHC program improves healthcare in rural communities while helping lower overall health care costs. But, the current \$400 million Rural Health Care Universal Service Support budget is inadequate to enable rural communities to realize these benefits. Instead, the budget remains stuck at the initial level set in 1997, despite two decades of inflation, advances in technology, and increased demand for services.

We believe that the FCC should increase the budget for the rural health care support mechanisms to reflect inflation over the past two decades and increases in the level of support available from those mechanisms, as well as increased technology and telecommunications demands due to our HIPAA legal obligations, advances in telemedicine capabilities, changes in patient expectations and standards of care, and new demands from mental health facilities.

Telehealth is a cost-effective technology development that has allowed us to dramatically improve access to and quality of care, accelerate diagnosis and treatment, avoid expensive travel costs, and expand local treatment options.

Our clinics are located in remote areas. Access is limited to plane or ferry, making it difficult and expensive, to provide needed services to our customers. RHC funding has been instrumental in our ability to serve our clients.

Community Connections routinely utilizes our telehealth system to provide psychiatric care to children throughout southern southeast Alaska communities. We also utilize it to provide mental health therapy and occupational and physical therapy. Telehealth is a vital and integral part of our service delivery system. Without the FCC support, we would not be able to provide these necessary services to our remote island communities.

The types of benefits and costs savings we have experienced are being replicated in many ways across rural areas in the State. It is also worth noting that Alaska is America's largest state, comprising roughly one-sixth the nation's total land area, yet has only about two tenths of one percent of America's population. 99.95% of the state is rural – a greater percentage than any other state in the nation. Several hundred of our communities are not reachable by road and are not connected to middle mile infrastructure. The distance to the nearest medical facility is often several hundred miles that can only be travelled by air. Especially because of our unique geography and rural nature, our rural clinics and hospitals urgently need assurance that additional RHC support will be available beginning in Funding Year 2018.

Growing evidence indicates that access to telehealth services also lowers health care costs in rural communities, saving money at the local, state and national levels. As one example, the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium estimates that access to telehealth services saves rural Alaskans \$10 million annually in travel costs along. At the national level, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) estimated that the annual cost in 2012 to deploy its telehealth program was \$1,600 per patient per year, compared to over \$13,000 for traditional home-based care and \$77,000 for nursing home care. Telehealth was also associated with a 25 percent reduction in the number of bed days of care, and a 19 percent reduction in hospital admissions, across all VHA patients utilizing telehealth services.

Thank you for taking steps to ensure the long-term viability of the Rural Health Care Program to meet the increased demand for telemedicine services both in Alaska and across the country.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bess Clark". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Bess" and last name "Clark" clearly distinguishable.

Bess Clark
Executive Director
Community Connections, Inc.
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Bess.Clark@comconnections.org

CC:

The Honorable Senator Lisa Murkowski
The Honorable Senator Dan Sullivan
The Honorable Congressman Don Young